

## CLAIMS

What I claim as my invention is:

1. A computer implemented system for distributing in real-time, inventory data acquired from point-of-sale systems at any one of a plurality of participating retail outlets, comprising:

- (a) a communication network means for sending and receiving data
- (b) an in-store system means for processing, storing, and communicating data
- (c) a subscriber system means for forming and transmitting requests for data
- (d) a host system means for processing, storing, and communicating data between a plurality of subscriber system means and a plurality of in-store system means

2. A communication network means as claimed in claim 1, further including a means to transmit and receive data between a plurality of said in-store system means, a plurality of said subscriber system means, and said host system means; and

such transmission means includes the ability to support a variety of protocols such as tcp/ip, http, https, etc.

3. An in-store system means, as claimed in claim 1, further including a point-of-sale means used to process sales transactions and perform inventory control at a merchant's place of business;

a memory database means used to store merchant identification data, sales transaction data, and inventory control data; and

a communication means used to transmit and receive data in real-time through said communication network means.

4. A subscriber system means as claimed in claim 1, further including a browser means used by a consumer to view, search, request, receive, and access merchant inventory data in real-time using said communication network means; and

a virtual stores server means used to search, request, receive, and access merchant inventory data in real-time using said communication network means and process online sales of goods or services offered for sale by said merchant.

5. A host system means as claimed in claim 1, further including a host system database means used to store inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data;

a host system communicator means used to receive and transmit data in real-time between said plurality of merchants and said plurality of consumers, using said communication network means; and

a data distributor means used to process data requests from said subscriber system means.

Whereby, the host system stores the network address of each participating in-store system and communicates with the in-store system on the subscriber system's behalf, thus allowing the in-store system's network address to be dynamically assigned, shielding the in-store systems from direct access by subscriber systems, and eliminating the need for subscriber systems to know the in-store system's network address in advance of making a request.

Whereby, real-time inventory data is sent from the in-store system to the host system and forwarded to the subscriber system or stored for later access by a consumer using the subscriber system; such that the consumer receives accurate and current inventory amounts from merchant's place of business.

Whereby, the consumer is reasonably assured that the merchant has the desired item currently in its inventory and ready for sale, thus reducing the amount of time and money spent by the consumer in searching for the desired item and providing the merchant with a ready and willing consumer to purchase the desired good or service.

6. A method for acquiring, managing, and distributing real-time inventory data on a communication network comprising the steps of:

- (a) providing a means to access current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from an in-store system;
- (b) providing a communication network means to transmit data
- (c) providing an in-store system means that transmits and receives data using said communication network means
- (d) providing a host system means that transmits and receives data using said communication network means and stores data on a host system database means
- (e) transmitting current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from said in-store system means to said host system means;
- (f) indexing and storing current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data using said host system database means;
- (g) providing a data distributor means that processes requests for inventory data
- (h) providing a subscriber system means that requests inventory data
- (i) receiving a request from a subscriber system means for inventory data
- (j) processing the request from said subscriber system means using said indexed and stored inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data; and
- (k) transmitting response to said subscriber system means.

7. A method as defined in claim 6, further comprising:

storing and indexing merchant's current network address in said host system database means; and

using this address to initiate communication between said host system means and said in-store system means to retrieve inventory data when a request is made by said subscriber system means.

8. A method as defined in claim 6, further comprising:

establishing a communication connection from said in-store system means to said host system means;

providing a triggering means that causes said in-store system means to transmit current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data to said host system means; and

storing transmitted current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address using said host system database means.

Whereby, the host system stores the network address of each participating in-store system and communicates with the in-store system on the subscriber system's behalf, thus allowing the in-store system's network address to be dynamically assigned, shielding the in-store systems from access by subscriber systems, and eliminating the need for subscriber systems to know the in-store system's network address in advance of making a request.

Whereby, real-time inventory data is sent from the in-store system to the host system and forwarded to the subscriber system or stored for later access by a consumer using the subscriber system; such that the consumer receives accurate and current inventory amounts from merchant's place of business.

Whereby, the consumer is reasonably assured that the merchant has the desired item currently in its inventory and ready for sale, thus reducing the amount of time and money spent by the consumer in searching for the desired item and providing the merchant with a ready and willing consumer to purchase the desired good or service.